

DISPATCHES™

Insights On Brand Development From The Marketing Front

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CREATIVE DEVELOPMENT DEMANDS A SENSE OF TIMING

Regardless of the skill, you just can't underestimate the value of a great sense of timing to go along with it. The legendary comedian, Jack Benny, was admired by other great comedians of his day for what many called his dead-panned delayed sense of timing—particularly between delivering the joke's set-up and then the punch-line. The original and only true "Voice," Frank Sinatra, always cited Ella Fitzgerald as his model because of her pitch-perfect sense of timing the words with the music. And then there's someone like Jack Nicklaus. Golf pundits often analyzed his "perfectly timed" swing in slow motion. But Jack had another, highly valuable sense of timing that probably contributed more than anything else to his record 18 major tournament victories: he knew when the time was just right to start making a fearsome run at the leaders.

Although it's not often spoken about, having a well-honed sense of timing is also incredibly valuable for winning in the creative development process—especially for clients. And by "well-honed sense of timing" we mean not only a real appreciation for *when* the time is right, but also a real appreciation for *how much* time is truly required. If we clients are honest, most of the time we lack an appreciation for either of these. We tend to ask the wrong questions at the wrong time; to make the wrong comments at the wrong time; and, for sure, to set (laughably) unrealistic time limits for creating the kinds of big ideas we always expect. So, we have a few suggestions to heighten clients' awareness of timing during the creative process...to instill a better sense of timing.

It Takes a Real Sense of Timing to Know...

- 1. When to start the actual creative work.** All too often, bedeviled by a hard, tight deadline to be in-market, brand teams give the go-ahead for idea development *without* having the Creative Brief totally signed off (by the most senior manager in the Company responsible for the resource investment). But rarely, if ever, do clients appreciate just how much money is immediately being spent—without that "in writing" concurrence by senior management. We like to say that the minute creative development begins, the taximeter is off and clicking...and it's no small-town taxi the brand team is riding in. Without that senior management agreement, there is always a chance that changes will be made to the brief; and not only will money will be wasted starting over, but so will time.
- 2. When to ask the creative agency, "What's your recommendation?"** So many of us marketers have been trained from early on to ask this question. And at the right time, it's a great question to ask. But so often the question gets asked at the wrong time. If you think about the purpose of such a question, the right and wrong times become obvious: the purpose is to make an informed preference over two or more ideas that appear to have equal appeal to the brand's target. With this purpose, the right time to ask the question is *late* in the development process, when ideas have been culled and checked out with target consumers or customers. It's effectively asking the agency to fall back on their years of experience with many clients and to choose, on their best

judgment, the better idea. The absolute wrong time to ask this question is *early on* in the creative development process: at those initial idea sessions, what one wants most is a wide range of options to explore further and check-out in the marketplace. In the early concept stages, in no way does one want to make a “quick-cut” to one or two possibilities—too much still needs to be developed!

- 3. When to huddle.** Although “huddling” has been around for a long time, it seems more popular with clients now than ever. The basic idea is to break, immediately after a creative presentation, and withdraw as a full client team to a separate room for discussion of the creative work; then, within, say, 30-40 minutes regroup with the creative agency to provide a “unified” response to their work. But, by design, a client huddle is “close to the vest” and exclusionary. In other words, the creative agency receives no immediate feedback on the work and is left on their own to await reactions—a bit like a courtroom awaits the return of the jury to hear a verdict.

Actually, the best time for a huddle is when a great deal of work has been presented—so much that it really **does** help and make good sense for the client to retire, reconsider, and better appreciate all that has been shown. Such a time usually occurs midway to later in the creative process, when a number of ideas have been more fully developed. Conversely, the huddle isn’t typically well-suited for the initial “tissue-concept” sessions. At those times what you really want are top-of-mind and gut reactions to the various raw idea-concepts. In fact, at these sessions there isn’t a need for a “unified” client point-of-view; what’s needed is a lively dialogue both (a) among the assorted client participants and (b) between them and their agency colleagues. One other thing: a good many clients have found it even more productive to invite one or two agency colleagues to sit in and listen when they huddle...making the breakaway a lot more inclusive.

- 4. When to re-visit the Creative Brief.** Once the creative process is underway, no one wants to go back and consider some changes to an *approved* brief (particularly one approved by senior management). But, until actual idea development gets going, there can never be 100% certainty that the approved Creative Brief will work as expected. We like to say that the initial tissue-concept session is when the full client-agency team actually gets to “test-drive” the brief. And, if for example, after two such tissue-concept presentations it’s obvious that the creative teams are not going to be able to develop big ideas that can communicate the three brief benefits, then it’s definitely time to pause the creative resource investment and make hard choices that will result in a revised but workable brief.
- 5. When to applaud.** Funny, but of all the “knowing when’s” involved in a great sense of timing, this one seems to be the hardest to put into practice...when it ought to be the easiest! For who knows how many reasons, it seems that corporate cultures simply don’t readily or frequently express public praise for good or even great work. And yet, there is still no stronger motivating behavior than to express an immediate, honest, and personable reaction of delight and joy when good/great ideas are shown for the first time. Said another way, the time is **always** right to say it when you honestly feel it: **“Sold. Done. I love it!”**

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